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CORPORATE CULTURE: THE LAST FRONTIER OF CONTROL?[1]

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the present U.S. use of the concept of 'corporate culture' using the sociology of Emile Durkheim as a conceptual framework. Durkheim was concerned with understanding where potential sources of morality might reside in a rapidly changing, increasingly differentiated society. Proponents of corporate culture do not rely specifically on Durkheim's work but essentially answer his question by suggesting that the corporation is the appropriate site for moral order. In this paper it is argued that the attempted manipulation of a corporation's culture is simply an addition to other forms of control which companies have tried to implement. More than other forms of control, however, corporate culture elicits sentiment and emotion, and contains possibilities to ensnare workers in a hegemonic system. On the other hand, strengthening corporate cultures in the U.S.A may also lead to increased worker homogenization and activism.

THE NATURE OF CORPORATE CULTURE

Littler observes that just one of the reasons that Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) is so important is because it smashes academic barriers and offers the potential for a new, integrated approach to the study and history of work (Littler, 1982, p. 26). The barrier which needs to be 'smashed' or at least broached is the one that exists between labour process theory and management theory. This paper attempts to accomplish the linking of the two perspectives by using the sociology of Durkheim, conceived in France around the turn of the century, as a conceptual framework. It is also inspired by Storey's 'Management control as a bridging concept' (1985).

According to Salaman (1978, p. 538), organizations can be seen as structures of control. Clegg and Dunkerley suggest that the essence of organization is:

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control of the labour process (1980, p. 1). Honour and Mainwaring (1982, p. 125) and Nichols (1980, p. 252) have called for a sociology of management. I agree and wish to extend their idea by proposing that what is needed to better understand how it is that people are organized into the labour process is an examination of the management process.

Organizational or corporate culture, and the focus in this paper is upon private U.S. corporations, provides an extremely interesting and current example of the management process and how it changes. Just one of the debates which has emerged around the topic of organization culture is whether culture is something an organization has, or whether culture is something an organization is (Smircich, 1983, p. 347). Put differently, is culture a variable or a metaphor? In this paper, culture is treated as a variable, a potential control variable. In other words, as Czarniawska states it elsewhere in this issue, what is stressed here is the conscious use of culture elements as opposed to organic cultural developments.

CORPORATE CULTURE IN U.S. PRIVATE ENTERPRISE

The Fall 1983 issue of *Administrative Science Quarterly* was devoted to the topic of organizational cultures and provides a nice summary of the various ways culture in organizations may be studied and analyzed.

A couple of contributors mention, in passing, the use of culture as a form of control of organizational participants (Gregory, 1983, p. 361; Wilkins and Ouchi, 1983, p. 464). Smircich, in the same issue, notes the 'tantalizing prospect' that organization culture may be a critical key which strategic managers might use to direct the course of their organizations (1983, p. 346). The above authors as well as their predecessors and successors, however, neglect to articulate in any depth how it is that culture may function as a form of control or why it is that earlier forms of control have not proved to be sufficiently effective. It is this aspect of culture upon which this paper focuses – culture as a management tool. Indeed, culture and its use is regarded here as part of management theory. As is the case with all theories of management, those who promote culture as a management method possess underlying theories or assumptions about human nature. These assumptions are abundantly clear in the works of Peters and Waterman (1982) and Athos and Pascale (1981).

First, a brief definition of corporate culture is necessary, as well as a description of its functions. In organizations, culture may be defined as an amalgam of beliefs, ideologies, language, ritual and myth (Pettigrew, 1979). Put more succinctly, 'It's the way we do things around here' (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). This does not, however, mean formal ways of doing things. Indeed, the crucial feature which distinguishes the use of culture from other forms of management is that culture is conveyed to its participants through the expression of sentiments, beliefs, and attitudes (Pfeffer, 1981). Thus it appeals to the

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emotional, non-rational, affective elements within employees. Corporate culture, then, is different from the usual methods of operation within U.S. firms, those of quantitative analysis, planning, formal rules and sanctions, the numerative rationalist approach which dominates business schools (Deal and Kennedy, 1982).

As far as top management is concerned, what is important is the articulation and channelling of the culture in directions which supply employees with guidelines and which promote a system of strongly-held, shared values. Recognition that the effects of a company's culture may be positive or negative for the purpose of corporate leaders (Martin and Siehl, 1983), or that the culture of upper management is not necessarily a unitary one shared by all organizational participants (Thompson and Wildavsky, this issue), means that conscious attempts must be made to dispense the culture in ways that are perceived as helpful in achieving the goals of corporate leaders. Put another way, the effects of culture should not be left to chance. Proper implementation, then, leads to internalization of desired values and norms. This internalization, whether or not conveyed through a formal indoctrination process, makes constant surveillance of workers unnecessary (Pfeffer, 1981). Everyone 'way down the line' knows the handful of guiding values (Peters and Waterman, 1982).

Each accentuated component of a corporation's culture, proponents believe, has an important purpose and, in one way or another, encourages employees to accept, even embrace, the goals and values of the leaders of the enterprise and, at the same time, promotes a sense of belongingness in all participants (Athos and Pascale, 1981; Bruce-Briggs, 1982; Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Martin, 1980; Martin *et al.*, 1983; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Pettigrew, 1979; Smith and Steadman, 1981; Trice *et al.*, 1969).

As is always the case, managers must implement this strategy of control. The proponents of the use of corporate culture (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Peters and Waterman, 1982) draw heavily on the work of Barnard: 'The inculcation of belief in the real existence of a common purpose is an essential executive function . . . [the manager] is primarily an expert in the promotion and protection of values' (1983, pp. 28, 87, 88). Deal and Kennedy state the case even more strongly. It is the explicit challenge to management to make '. . . thousands and thousands of people . . . have a strongly ingrained sense of the company's values' (1982). If management meets this challenge, employees identify more completely with the firm and see their own interests as congruent with it (Athos and Pascale, 1981). The manager becomes an evangelist, a shaman, a statesperson. Properly implemented, the use of culture as a managerial strategy is seen to be potentially very effective in promoting loyalty, enthusiasm, diligence and even devotion to the enterprise.

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DURKHEIM AND CORPORATE CULTURE

Why might employees embrace corporate culture? In the U.S.A., advocates of its use are ready with an answer. Ties to community and church have weakened and people's affiliatory needs are not being met. More, these losses of ties have led to a concomitant loss of meaning in individuals' lives. Since meaning is something that everyone desperately needs, individuals will sacrifice a great deal to institutions which supply it (Ouchi and Johnson, 1978; Athos and Pascale, 1981). Aside from the obvious parallels between the above and Durkheim's concepts regarding the positive uses of the division of labour, there is a more subtle and interesting application of his work.

Indeed it is in the various writings of Durkheim that a conceptual framework for discussions of corporate culture may be found. The theme which appears repeatedly in Durkheim's work is that of morality. For him, moral behaviour implies conformity to norms, a sense of 'ought'. It also implies structures or limits within which individuals know what they can legitimately expect to achieve. Finally, morality is, above all, social in nature. By this Durkheim meant that morality begins with disinterest in self and attachment to something larger than self; it is a solidary attachment to a group and suggests sacrifice to it (1933, p. 398).

Initially Durkheim believed that the division of labour would become the chief source of social solidarity and thus the foundation of moral order. Yet he later discarded this notion not only because he viewed exchange relations as temporary, but also because the utilitarian nature of the workplace may be classified as falling into his realm of the profane. The realm of the profane, for Durkheim, consists of the concrete, the rational, the material; it elicits neither sentiment nor emotion. Sources of morality were to be found in Durkheim's realm of the sacred (1965, p. 243). He noted that the sacred realm is actually a function which promotes and maintains cohesion among members of society. So when Durkheim speaks of religion, its sacred aspects are not that the bonds between individuals and their gods are strengthened but that the bonds between the individuals and the community are strengthened (1965, p. 258). The religious impulse had, however, faded. Where, then, would be the locus of morality? Durkheim finally settles upon society itself. Society is appropriate because it is exterior and superior to its members, it brings out the best in all individuals. Recognition of society's attributes and beneficence elicits sentiment and emotion which are also sustained through the use of much ritual, ceremony and heavy symbolism which revivify previous historical moments of collective ferment and effervescence (1965, pp. 240, 252, 263).

While the protagonists of corporate culture in the U.S.A. do not seem familiar with the work of Durkheim, they have stumbled upon his central ideas. Rather than society as the sacred realm, the enterprise becomes sacred. Employees at all levels in the firm become quasi-parishioners. Indeed, the corporation is

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spoken of as a potential source of non-deified, non-religious spirituality (Athos and Pascale, 1981). Thus, in cases where a company's culture acts as a strong integrating variable, we may in fact speak of encumbents as organizational 'members', members who we may be tempted to go so far as to say possess a 'corporate consciousness' (Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980, p. 122).[2] The rites, rituals, ceremonies and symbolism contribute to the elicitation of sentiment and emotion and, in Durkheimian terms, keep the eyes of all participants fixed on the same goal and concurring in the same faith (1973, pp. 48, 161, 92). Advocates of corporate culture even recognize the dualism of human nature about which Durkheim wrote (1973, p. 158). Employees want, on the one hand, to be unique and 'stand out' yet, on the other, desire cession to the whole. This seeming paradox is resolved by strong-culture companies, U.S. style, stressing the importance of each individual; everyone has a chance to be a 'winner' (Peters and Waterman, 1982). In this way, both the collectivist and individualistic aspects of people might be reconciled. For Durkheim, the struggle within individuals between devotion to self and devotion to society is natural, yet society emerges victorious for it penetrates consciousness and fashions it (1973, p. 163). Among the corporate culture advocates, however, one should substitute the word 'company' for the word 'society'.

In this regard, corporate culture as a method of control strongly resembles what Etzioni (1961) called 'moral involvement' by participants in organizations (Hofstede, 1980, p. 48). This, according to Etzioni, is typically found in religious orders, totalitarian parties, voluntary associations and sometimes in certain professional institutions such as hospitals and universities. Note that for-profit organizations are not present on Etzioni's list. What the above organizations' members share is a sense of mission, typically a profound belief in improving the human condition in one way or another.

THE CRISIS OF BUREAUCRATIC CONTROL

We are now in a position to discuss how it is that the manipulation of a corporation's culture has come to the fore as the latest and possibly most powerful form of control.

In Edwards' discussion of the transformation of the workplace in the U.S.A. (1979), he describes the emergence of *bureaucratic control*. Rather than domination being exercised by individual bosses or by the pace of machinery, domination is embedded in the social and organizational structure of the firm (1979, p. 131). Elaborate formal procedures exist for promotions, rewards, sanctions. If workers adhere to formal procedure they are promised security and advancement through the intricate and highly stratified maze of job grades which are frequently not skill related (Burawoy, 1979; Stone, 1975). While at first it was primarily a system of white collar control, it now, as a result of conflict with blue collar workers, includes them as well (Edwards, 1979). In some ways it

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might be said that bureaucratic control is control by incentive. The incentive that internal job ladders are assumed to provide in the U.S.A. controls workers by dividing and fragmenting them. Bureaucratic control, then, focuses upon individualistically inclined, future-oriented workers, people who are motivated by the possibility that they may participate beneficially in the reward system of the concern. As a motivator, however, control by incentive contains features which, in the long run, work against the goals of the corporation. After all, not everyone can advance or receive promotions. Workers' experiences of blocked mobility lead to negative consequences regarding firm loyalty and commitment (Kanter, 1977).

Moreover, assumptions that people are, *by nature*, as highly individualistic as top managers and personnel/human resource specialists in the U.S.A. would have us believe is subject to debate. While Hofstede (1980) points out in his comparison of dominant national values in 40 countries that the U.S.A. stands out as the single most individualistic of all 40, there are class, ethnic and gender differences *vis-à-vis* the strength of individualistic orientations in that country. Two recent theoretically disparate but not incompatible analyses by U.S. social scientists point out that there are dilemmas and consequences associated with U.S. individualism and that potential sources of community are possible as well (Bellah *et al.*, 1985; O'Connor, 1984). In collectivist oriented societies, the application of individual incentives is even more problematic (Hofstede, 1980; 1984).

There are other features of bureaucratic control which are experiencing great contradictions and which may tend to push it into the background as a form of control (Gordon *et al.*, 1982). First, firms have needed, in response to struggles by workers, to guarantee long-time, even lifetime employment to well-behaved employees. Because of the current recession these promises are increasingly broken. Pledges of regular pay rises are also difficult to keep during times of falling prices. This is an inherent problem when labour is, as it is now, a quasi-fixed rather than a variable cost (Edwards, 1979; Stone, 1975).

Moreover, many places of work are undergoing new sources of change which affect the way that work is organized. The increasing introduction of automation and microelectronics deskills some kinds of workers and reskills others. This creates a growing chasm between the two types of workers, thereby obliterating another promise made in bureaucratic control, that is, internal job ladders (Rothwell and Zegveld, 1979). A side effect of this may be that the groups of deskilled workers who lose the individual incentive of advancement will become less fragmented and divided and, once again, more homogenized.

Edwards argues that bureaucratic control shapes people into more firm-orientated individuals. This is due, in part, to the fact that the criteria for evaluating employees concentrate more on behavioural attributes or personal traits than upon skill. He portrays wage-earners as owing their demeanour and affection to the firm (1979, p. 148). Yet, while bureaucratic control may prompt individuals to act *as if* the company is their source of meaning and commitment

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that is an entirely different matter from seriously believing it. In other words, control remains externalized rather than becoming internalized (Lebas and Weigenstein, this issue). Following Durkheim, the individualistic nature of this kind of control precludes the solidarity and bonding which a 'moral' organization could generate. Workers may well become career- or security-orientated but the material, concrete nature of such an orientation leaves the system of bureaucratic control in the realm of the profane.

THE LIMITS OF HUMANISTIC CONTROL

Bureaucratic control, then, could no longer stand alone. Various strands of human relations styles of management moved into the foreground of many companies' *répertoire* of control techniques. Mayo (1933; 1945) is clearly responsible for the two major contributions to human relations techniques of management. While Mayo drew on the work of Durkheim he was, it seems, only familiar with Durkheim's piece on suicide. Mayo had noticed with some alarm that society was not fulfilling its integrative function. Rather than, however, turning his attention to the possibility of integrating individuals into the firm as a whole, Mayo concentrated his analysis upon the effects of the environment of the individual on the individual in the small group (Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980). This particular focus of Mayo, and his assertion that management must encourage the developing and sustaining of the small work group or team and, more, allow employees to have a say in the organization of their productive activity (1945, pp. 70, 73) has, without doubt, influenced such managerial techniques as 'participative decision making' and 'team building labs'.

The second strand of human relations was developed from Mayo's observations that managers need to be careful listeners, they need to be 'fair' and they must be trained in logical understanding (1933, pp. 110, 183, 185). This generated the counselling ideology in management as opposed to the old authoritarian methods. Mayo was, after all, responding to the dehumanizing effects of Taylorism, and also to deskilling and increased task fragmentation. He viewed workers as not simply 'economic' individuals but as inherently sociable and cooperative. Later, industrial psychologists would use Mayo's works as a basis for 'job enrichment', 'job enlargement', and 'job rotation' plans. All these developments attempted to offset the future-orientated, individualistic, competitive features of bureaucratic control by trying to shape wage-earners into present-orientated, cooperative people who will devote themselves to the task at hand, the here-and-now, and the immediate work group whose cooperation is necessary if the goals of management are not to be defeated (Mayo, 1945, p. 111).

In the U.S., human relations styles of management were not implemented to any large extent until the termination of World War II. The widespread

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labour unrest which followed coincided with the dissemination of the work of Kurt Lewin and his students, followers and associates, especially Douglas McGregor. Unlike Mayo and his associates, the Lewinians were not subject to the critical barrages launched by social scientists, and within a few years, human relations was in place as management theory and practice in progressive U.S. firms.

Continuing with a Durkheimian analysis, the reason that humanistic control fails as any sort of ultimate method of control is because, again, it does not possess the capabilities to generate sentiment or emotion. While it may encourage employees to interact in more cooperative ways within the small work group, there is still no method by which individuals may span or broach the vertical divisions in the corporation in order to have a direct, unmediated connection with the goals and values of dominant *élites*. There is nothing within humanistic control which promotes senses of the broader collectivity. In the last analysis, human relations, as Mills acerbically put it, attempts to conquer work alienation within the bounds of work alienation (1951).

CORPORATE CULTURE AS THE ULTIMATE CONTROL?

While it is certainly not a new wish among corporate leaders, or leaders of any kind, that lower level participants should devote themselves to the organization, what is new is the recognition that the generation and elicitation of employees' devotion to the enterprise cannot be accomplished by simply 'fixing' the rewards system, the task, the employees, or the managers. The latest strategy of control implies that the top management team aims to have individuals possess direct ties to the values and goals of the dominant *élites* in order to activate the emotion and sentiment which might lead to devotion, loyalty and commitment to the company. In this sense, the use of corporate culture is analogous to Rousseau's notion of the individual citizen's relationship to the General Will. When viewed this way, we find that man is free inside the society (the corporation) but the legislator (the chief executive) is to lead him to the knowledge of the General Will (corporate policy) which will serve the entire collectivity (Shorris, 1981).

To recapitulate, the three methods of control that are being discussed look like this:

Bureaucratic Control

manipulation of rewards → loyalty → increased productivity

Humanistic Control

'satisfying' task or work group life → loyalty → increased productivity

Culture Control

manipulation of culture including myth, ritual → love of firm and its goals → increased productivity

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Note that the three types contain different underlying assumptions about human nature. Bureaucratic control views people as rational, economic, competitive, future-orientated individuals. Humanistic control views people as sociable, desiring satisfying work, present-orientated and cooperative. Control by corporate culture views people as emotional, symbol-loving, and needing to belong to a superior entity or collectivity.[3]

It is only this last form of control which has the potential to qualify the firm as lying in Durkheim's realm of the sacred. This method of control, then, seems to contain possibilities of being extremely powerful in ensnaring workers in a hegemonic system.

At this time there is no persuasive evidence, however, that the manipulation of U.S. corporations' cultures really functions as a form of control. It is even less certain that its use as a management strategy is generalizable to other societies any more than other management techniques which have been espoused in the United States. And if it is learned that employees have embraced the culture of the firm, this does not necessarily preclude worker resistance. Resting within the concept of corporate culture is the notion of shared values and a heightened sense of collectivity; it implies commitment to the firm rather than to career or lesiure activities. But control by corporate culture has within it the essential contradiction that while individuals may become more enthusiastic, productive and committed to the corporation, they will, at the same time, be labouring in collective ways and sharing collective values. In the dominant belief system of U.S. top management, any source of homogenization of employees is potentially threatening. The homogenization of emotion and sentiment may cut through divisions among workers and lead to intensified interaction and frequency of discourse. Increased employee demands and activism are among the possible consequences.

NOTES

[1] The author is grateful for the helpful criticism and advice provided by Stewart Clegg, William Friedland, Robert Marotto, James O'Connor, Valerie Simmons and Mark Traugott on earlier versions of this manuscript.

[2] Etzioni's view of the word 'member' is as follows: 'Members' is reserved for those who have at least some unusually quite strong moral commitment to their organization' (1961, p. 17). For Clegg and Dunkerley, it was Elton Mayo who was the architect of instilling 'corporate consciousness' in the labour force (1980, p. 122). My account will suggest why human relations and neo-human relations do not succeed as effective agendas of control nor as methods of instilling 'corporate consciousness'.

[3] It is frequently the case that all three types of control are used simultaneously in progressive U.S. firms. The contradictions which inhere in such a practice, and the implications of those, will be discussed by the author in a paper now in progress.

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